

Briefing on Salmon Management Issues for Kodiak Salmon Summit
Alaska Department of Fish and Game
April 4, 2002

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game has been working with salmon processors, fishermen, the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute, the Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission, and the Alaska Board of Fisheries on fishery management changes that improve efficiency, lower costs, and enhance the quality of the commercial salmon harvest. These discussions began several years ago and were central to the work of the three salmon industry forums hosted by Governor Knowles. However, in the past year momentum for change has increased dramatically as worsening economic conditions of both processors and fishermen press the need for fundamental changes.

Industry leaders have identified three key principles they intend to follow in evaluating what changes they want to make in the salmon fisheries of the state. These are: develop a consensus of affected parties on proposed changes, tackle specific changes on a region by region, or even fishery by fishery, basis, and recognize that what works for one fishery may not work for a different fishery. The department's role has been to act as a facilitator, provide information, generally support industry discussions, and assist in bringing about changes that industry and community leaders believe to be in their interest.

Over the years, the department has formed harvest task forces, at the request of industry, to discuss potential changes in management. These task forces typically include fishery managers from the department and both fishermen and processors. They are organized on a fishery and regional basis. In Southeast Alaska, there is a purse seine task force, a drift gillnet task force, and a troll fishery task force. These task forces have been meeting formally on an annual or biannual basis for many years.

In Prince William Sound, a Salmon Harvest Task Force that includes both purse seine and gillnet gear group representatives, processors and hatchery operators has been meeting for several years. This group was initially formed to address critical management issues relating to the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill. Subsequently it addressed strategies to improve product quality that resulted in significant changes in the management approach for the purse seine fishery. Currently two groups operate in the Prince William Sound area, the Task Force and a group sponsored by the regional aquaculture association called the "Utilization Committee". These groups are presently meeting to address issues such as the timing and strategy for the early season of the Copper River gillnet fishery as well as capacity and cost recovery issues relating to the purse seine fishery in the Sound.

In the Kuskokwim area, the department, industry and other salmon user groups formed the Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group in 1988 as an advisory group for inseason management of the commercial salmon fishery. Due to the poor market conditions of recent years the group has worked with the industry to take measures that focused on improving product quality. These measures have included

shortening the duration of commercial fishing periods and promoting fisherman to use slush bags that keep the fish chilled.

Less formalized processes have occurred on a periodic basis in Bristol Bay, Chignik, the Alaska Peninsula and other parts of the state for discussing management, processing and quality issues. In the Kotzebue and Norton Sound Districts, fishing time has been altered so that processor capacity would not be exceeded and so that processors could either fly fish out on scheduled flights or to make more efficient use of tendering capacity. In some rare cases, as in the 2000 Norton Sound pink salmon fishery, the fishery remained open with the processor directing their fishers who delivery to them. The limited number of processors that service the Alaska Peninsula area are engaging the department and fishermen in discussions on how best to construct fishery openings to promote efficiencies in tendering, increase delivery of catches to shore, and to improve product quality.

This year, three important developments have resulted from these regional fishery discussions. In January, the Board of Fisheries approved a proposal to allocate a portion of the sockeye salmon harvest in the Chignik purse seine fishery to a cooperative of Chignik permit holders. The board established the minimum number of permits holders the cooperative must represent, 51, before a cooperative will receive an allocation. It also established April 15 as the deadline for joining the cooperative, and set a percentage allocation per permit holder that the cooperative will receive. There may only be one cooperative in the Chignik fishery.

This action was the result of a proposal (#105) submitted by a group of Chignik fishermen. The goals of the proposal are to reduce the costs of harvesting fish, reduce excess harvesting capacity, improve quality, and enable experiments in niche marketing that take advantage of improvements in quality resulting from changes in the conduct of the fishery. This was a bold move by the Alaska Board of Fisheries and was supported by a large majority of the Chignik permit holders and communities in the Chignik vicinity.

The second major change in the conduct of a salmon fishery in 2002 will be in the Southeast Alaska purse seine fishery. As a result of discussions held during the winter by the Southeast Alaska purse seine task force, the department is altering the conduct of the purse seine fishery in Southeast Alaska during the peak of the pink salmon run, typically the last three weeks of August. The goals of this change are two-fold: 1) to improve the quality of pink salmon during years with large returns by delivering a steady supply of fresh fish to the processing plants throughout the week and 2) to lower costs, particularly tendering costs that are a large expense in Southeast Alaska. The fishery management change that will facilitate these industry changes is a modification of the two-day-on and two-day-off fishing schedule the department had previously used to a four-days-on and one-day-off schedule, possibly even going to a 6-day continuous fishing schedule. This change does not come without its challenges, but the staff has been willing to undertake them, understanding as they do the tremendous contribution the salmon industry makes to Southeast Alaska.

A third change was the institution of subdistrict registration in the Kuskokwim River salmon fishery. The Alaska Board of Fisheries formalized this management tool in January 2001 at the request of industry to address limited processor capacity in the Kuskokwim Area and to improve product quality of the commercial harvest. The action taken by the BOF allows the fishery manager to divide the lower Kuskokwim River (District 1) into two subdistricts (A and B). Fisherman must register to fish in one subdistrict or the other. When requested by processors, the subdistricts are opened on separate days. Total harvest is comparable to the normal a full district opening, but fish are delivered over two separate days. The protracted deliveries allow fish buyers to process the fish with a smaller more efficient crew, plus the quality of the product is improved.

Discussions are also beginning in the Bristol Bay region about bringing change to the largest sockeye salmon fishery in the world. The Bristol Bay Economic Development Corporation is organizing this effort. The department expects to extend whatever support is requested to this process. In fact, a senior manager of the department is serving on the advisory panel that is working with the study team. No changes are expected in Bristol Bay for the 2002 season, as this process is just getting underway. However, CFEC is conducting an optimum number study as part of the state's effort to revitalize the Bristol Bay fishery.

During the next few years, Alaskans will be looking at the management of their salmon fisheries to see what needs to be done to enable the state's commercial salmon industry to survive and even prosper in the new age of global markets and farmed salmon. It is impossible to predict which approaches will be the most successful in lowering costs, improving quality, and achieving the other goals the industry has identified. The next few years will undoubtedly be a period of experimentation and evaluation. But with the focus on fishery management and structure, the Department of Fish and Game and the Alaska Board of Fisheries will play a significant role. The department will continue the existing harvest task force processes and will discuss expansion of these efforts into other fisheries with the industry as warranted. In addition, department staff stands ready to participate and support other statewide forums or task forces that may be formed by the administration, the Alaska Legislature, and the U.S. Congressional delegation.